

## Counselor's Corner: September 2021 - The Importance of Routine for Mental Health

It's back to school time! This is a great opportunity to review our current routines. If your household is anything like mine, the summer routine was very relaxed. Bed time was variable, screen time was loosely monitored, and breakfast was sometimes a cold piece of leftover pizza. But now, it's back to business. We're working on consistent bedtimes, morning routines, healthy meals, after school activities, pick-ups & drop-offs, making time for reading and homework, and mom's hybrid work schedule. Without a consistent routine juggling all of this would be pure chaos! And when life is in chaos mode, it disrupts our mental health. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, and depressed when things are feeling out of control. So for our mental health – a consistent routine is encouraged.

A consistent routine offers many benefits including set expectations, a feeling of safety, decreased stress, added confidence, feeling in control, and for self-care.

There is a sense of calm that comes over us when we know exactly what is expected and we can prepare appropriately to meet those expectations. On the other hand, unclear expectations are unsettling and can often lead to feelings of anxiousness. While kids would never admit that they need structure – they do! And you can see them thrive in environments where expectations are clear, consistent, and manageable. They look to us, as their caregivers to provide direction and safety - and expectations do just that.

Consistent routines can provide enough guidance to keep stress at bay. As adults, we generally have set routines that allow us to meet deadlines and honor commitments. How do we do that? For me, it's a calendar (or 4) to keep me on track. The ability to map out my days hour by hour allows the chaos to be organized in a way that makes it more manageable. Calendars calm my stress and give me the confidence to get it all done... well most of it anyway. One way to help kids not become overwhelmed or stressed out is to share the schedule and tasks in an age appropriate way. When kids are young, this might be illustrated with a picture chart consisting of images representing things like brushing teeth, getting dressed, and eating breakfast. As kids get older, perhaps a family calendar on a dry erase board in a high traffic area in the home might be helpful. Keeping kids in the loop reinforces the expectations, and creates comfort when they feel part of the plan.

A routine also helps us create a plan for self-care. In addition to our basic daily needs we can add important things that we know boost mental health like exercise, meditation, adequate sleep, and even some fun!

Some things to consider as part of a positive mental health routine:

- Consistent wake up & bed time
- Eating healthy meals
- Exercise/Stretching
- Limit screen time
- Shower & dress (even if WFH)
- Journal/Gratitude time

Good luck with your new and improved routines. Here's to a happy and healthy school year ahead!